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WHAT IS THE ETHICAL VALUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN MODERN LIFE?¹

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Our question may most satisfactorily be answered by a division of the Old Testament into five elements. We have here (1) the records of the national life of the people of Israel, written with a distinctly didactic aim, and therefore involving a moral judgment on the part of the writers; (2) the laws of this people presented with divine sanctions, indicating what were considered practicable ethical standards for the nation; (3) the prophecies, deliverances of the religious teachers, in which are especially the ethical ideals of the Old Testament; (4) the Wisdom, embodying the ethical speculations of the philosophers and the practical teachings of the sages; (5) the Psalms, the prayers and praises of Israel, in which the ethical quality of the inner religion of the Old Testament is revealed.

I. We consider first then the ethical value, for modern life, of Old Testament narrative. Putting aside the large amount of genealogy and similar material, which the later priestly writers preserved for their theocratic purpose, and in which there is for the most part no moral quality, there remains that body of narrative—legend, folk-story, hero tradition, historic record—which really constitutes the Old Testament as popularly known. At this point our inquiry becomes most vital: What is the ethical value of the fascinating stories of the Old Testament? It must not be said that these narratives are simply records, in which no ethical judgment is involved. They are collated with at least general didactic intent. And the popular instinct which expects moral quality in every Old Testament narrative is to a large extent justified.

It is evident that the foundation of these stories is in that Semitic paganism of which the Hebrews were a part. We are introduced to a people who practice polygamy, concubinage, slavery, blood

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revenge as a matter of course. Adultery is reprehensible in the female, but in the male only as it interferes with the property rights of his neighbor. The enslavement of the captives of war, including the compulsory concubinage of the maidens, is the natural order of things. Most barbarous punishment of enemies is chronicled without comment. Clemency to enemies is generally considered as an act of weakness, if not of impiety. It must at least be said that no adverse ethical judgment is indicated in the stories of Jacob's clever rascality with Laban; of Judah's shameless act of profligacy; of Rahab's falsehood; of Jael's betrayal of the sacred law of hospitality; of Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter for his foolish vow; of David's contemplated extirpation of the house of Nabal, his treacherous dealing with his Philistine friends, his dying vengeful counsels to his son; of Elijah's slaughter of the Baal prophets and his fiery destruction of the unfortunate soldiers sent for his arrest; of Jehu's bloody revolution; of Ezra's stern divorce of the foreign wives, even though they had borne children to their husbands; and of Mordecai's plan of wholesale slaughter of his people's foes.

In some of these narratives the ethical character of the God of the Old Testament is involved. Israel's bloody wars of extermination, in which, after the manner of that day, no quarter was given even to the women and children, are supposed to have been undertaken with the approval of Jehovah. He receives his share of the spoil of Midian, including a proportion of the virgins, who in this case have been spared after the rest of the captives have been slaughtered in cold blood. Jehu is promised a dynasty of four generations for his massacres. The pathetic murder of the seven sons of Saul seems to be required not only by the Gibeonites, but by the God who will not be satisfied without an atonement of blood. And Jehovah is represented as desirous of punishing Israel, and therefore instigating David to an act of impiety which shall afford the necessary occasion.

In a sense it may be said that there is a negative ethical value in the recognition of this background of paganism. It throws into strong relief those nobler narratives in which a positive ethical value is to be found. The significance of Israel was never in what she shared with the Semitic world, but in her advance upon the morality

about her. The presence of pagan survivals in the Old Testament enables us to estimate the ethical advance manifest in the truly great stories which it contains. Such are the creation narratives, picturing the world fresh from the hands of the good God, filled with calamity only by the sins of men; the story of Abraham and his magnanimity; of Joseph in that old day "wearing the white flower of a blameless life;" of Moses and Joshua the patriots; even of Samson in the rude stories of the Judges pictured as the slave of sin; of Samuel who left office with clean and empty hands; of Jonathan the generous; of David, sinner, penitent, and, in his troubles, kingly; of Elijah, the incarnate conscience; of Ruth, the stranger blest of God, true daughter and true wife; of Jonah, where the vindictive tribal deity becomes the God and guardian of mankind.

II. We seek the ethical value of the Old Testament secondly in the laws, which indicate what were considered practicable ethical standards for the nation. And again we find a common Semitic foundation and a superstructure of higher development. The foundation of Hebrew law is that of all law—the sense of right. The morals of a people are their *mores*, the customs which the common conscience approves and requires. The interesting comparison with the Code of Hammurabi shows that there was a great Semitic common law of immemorial usage. And while this testifies to an early sense of right, there is much that indicates a very imperfect ethical development. In Israel, slavery is recognized and regulated. The power conceded to the master is not quite absolute, but he may beat his slave to any point short of immediate death. *Lex talionis* obtains, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, burning for burning. The custom of blood revenge is legalized. The guilt of an accused wife is tested by the primitive ordeal of the water of jealousy. Concubinage is recognized and regulated. Divorce is allowed without question to the man. The child of unlawful birth is excluded from the assembly.

In connection with these older conditions there is to be noted in the legislation a process of amelioration. How carefully such rights as the slave may have are guarded. If the angry master have injured him he must be given his freedom; if the female slave become a concubine she cannot be sold; and, whatever the actual practice

may have been, the law contemplated many possibilities of manumission. So too the rights of the wife are guarded, although she has not the position which American law accords her. The cities of refuge for the innocent manslayer are a mitigation of that law of blood revenge which seems ineradicable in the Orient. The ethical value of the legislation is to be seen in these efforts after reform.

The mass of the Hebrew law impresses one with its fine sense of justice. The poor man, the creditor, the wage-earner are protected in their rights. Bribery and false witness, the curses of the East, are singled out for condemnation. More than that, a noble charity is part of the law. The privilege of gleaning, the prohibition of interest, the restoration of the garment taken in pledge, the festal share of the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, the requirement of liberality to the manumitted slave, even the prohibition of muzzling the treading ox, are indications of the nobler extension of the meaning of the "ought."

The Hebrew law codes bear the marks of the influence of creative minds. The great name Moses stands for a series of men inspired with a sense of right and truth, who from age to age, not as mere codifiers, gathered the old law into statutes and lifted its ethical character a little higher. So we have the Decalogue with its grand imperatives "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not." And so we have the great commands of love to God and love to man, which are for our day, as for Jesus' day, the summing-up of obligation.

The ethical value, then, of the Old Testament for modern life, so far as its legislation is concerned, is to be seen in the gradual amelioration of the harsh conditions of lower civilization, in the growth of the sense of right, in the realization of the obligation of charity, and in the noble ethical ideals of Israel's great lawgivers.

III. The third element to be considered is prophecy. The prophets believe in one God, who is good, and whose demand of men is goodness. The old idea of the tribal God had not much moral force. The religion of the trafficker, who says: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on . . . then shall Jehovah be my God: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the

tenth unto thee" has not much ethical value. But the prophets have a different temper. They may be described as servants of the holy God with a passion for righteousness. Their moral instinct is almost unerring. Their ideals for society are still inspiring.

Consider their insistence upon social righteousness. The Hebrews thought of foreign enemies as their national dangers and of material wealth as their national glory. They ever looked back to the reign of Solomon, when no foreigner dared invade Israel, and when "silver was like stones in Jerusalem" as the time of national well-being. The reign of Jeroboam II, when as yet Assyria was afar off, unfear'd, when the national boundaries had been extended, when there were palaces of cedar and couches of ivory, when agriculture and commerce were flourishing, filled the people with complacency, and encouraged them to make their religious ceremonial magnificent. The prophets presented an entirely different idea. Foreign invasion is a merely external calamity. Social injustice is the real national evil. The wealthy state may be only the basket of summer fruit, "the goodly apple rotten at the core." No message can be more thoroughly ethical and more thoroughly modern. The gravest national dangers are the aggregation of wealth in the hands of the few and monopoly of opportunity that destroys the independent middle class; luxury, depriving the great of their power of leadership and destroying them in self-indulgence; oppression, injustice, taking all hope from the poor, either driving them to rebellion or destroying their usefulness in the state; lying, weakening the tie between man and man; bribery and venality, corrupting the national life at its springs; robbery and murder, attacking the elemental conditions of social order. The prophets believed and preached that the moral reformation of the state would preserve it against all enemies, while no national advance could save a people whose own life was morally corrupt. Each individual nation of the world today may take warning from the fate of little Israel and lesser Judah, if it will give attention to the moral diagnosis of national disease so pitilessly presented by the prophets.

On the other hand, the prophets' ethical ideal is exactly our social need at this hour. In our appalling problem of capital and labor, justice is the great desideratum. In all our political endeavors,

justice—fair elections, fair legislation, fair administration, fair judicial decision—is the one thing sought. The problem of the negro, of the immigrant, of the Indian, presents the same need. The horror of the tenements, the sad shame of the unemployed, call upon us for the same remedy. The world has never tried what could be done to make the perfect state simply by justice. It is an echo of the fine theory of the prophets when Richelieu says in his vindication to the king:

I found France rent asunder,
The rich men despots, and the poor banditti;
Sloth in the mart, and shame within the temple;
Brawls festering to rebellion; and weak laws
Rotting away with rust in antique sheaths.
I have recreated France . . . What was my art?
Genius some say; some fortune; witchcraft, some.
Not so; —my art was justice.

Of course there are evils within our state that even social righteousness would not remove. And the prophets saw them in their day. Their demand rings out for personal goodness. Drunkenness and licentiousness, twin deadly dangers, the curse of all classes, are again and again the lament of the prophets. The prophetic ideal is the man of truth and sobriety, strong to stand for the right, willing to die for his convictions, yet humble, simple, kindly. The character of the prophets themselves is a moral inspiration, pure, truthful, fearless, tender, preaching without reward, without popularity, and with a passionate desire to help men. If there is moral value in self-forgetful devotedness to others' welfare, then the prophets, vicarious sufferers for Israel's sins, may still inspire us. Whatever may be our view of that mysterious sufferer in Isaiah, chap. 53, there can be no doubt that the devotion of Jeremiah and the prophets formed the basis for the sublime conception.

Our inquiry does not lead us into a study of the religion of the prophets, except to note that it is throughout an ethical religion. Hosea sounds the great prophetic word: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Isaiah echoes the same demand: "I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting." And Micah expresses the essentially ethical character of religion in that noblest utterance of prophecy: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah

require of thee, but to do justly and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

IV. The fourth element which we consider is Wisdom, the writings of the sages. Their most characteristic work, for it represents their activity through the centuries, is the book of Proverbs. The ethical value of the book for modern life is evident from its wholesome effect wherever it has been employed in the instruction of the young. It is not very much a Jewish book. It appeals to the universal conscience. Ruskin's fine tribute to the worth of Proverbs is well known. It has often been said that the stable, if somewhat canny, character of the Scot is in part due to the attention given to this book. The proverb-writers find moral motive in the consequences of good and evil conduct. They believe this is a moral world, in which goodness leads to blessedness and evil leads to shame. A good motive, if not the highest, and in large measure true. Moreover they teach that Wisdom, the right way of life, is to be sought for herself,

She is more precious than rubies;
And none of the things thou canst desire are to be compared unto her.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
And all her paths are peace.

When we pass to the body of the Proverbs, their modern ethical value is evident enough, for they deal, in pithy, pungent sayings, with conduct—personal, family, commercial, political, social. And Matthew Arnold has reminded us that conduct is three-fourths of life.

The sages were thinkers, and when men begin to think they find problems; so the wise men of Israel were confronted with the great mysteries of life. They grappled with the age-old problem—ever an ethical problem—why, under the government of a good God, should a good man suffer? And their noblest piece of literature, the book of Job, is the result of their questioning. Jewish orthodoxy, shutting its eyes to the facts of life, insisted that a good man does not suffer. Job is a moral teacher because he is true to the facts of experience. It is better to doubt religious opinions than to deny evident realities. It is not moral to deny the moral confusion of the world. Job is a teacher for today, as he struggles through his

doubt, not to a solution, for there is no answer to ultimate questions, but to a recognition of the infinite power, the personal Jehovah, who holds the mysterious forces of the universe in his hands.

An even deeper question which arose later in the more pessimistic mood of Hebrew wisdom is whether life after all is worth living. If the last verses of Ecclesiastes be really a part of the book, it is easy to take refuge in the position that, after all confusing speculation, there is only one practical wisdom, "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man." But perhaps the editors of the book felt the need of just such an easy conclusion of the matter, and so furnished it themselves. If that be the case, the ethical contribution of the editors is more apparent than that of the book itself. Ecclesiastes comes from a man whose way is dark. He has neither the vision of the prophets nor the general philosophy of providence that characterizes the sages. He does believe there is good in the world, and he does strive after it. But we miss the passion, hope, faith, that we desire in our sacred books. Were this bit of speculation representative of the wisdom of the wise, we should not often turn to them for moral encouragement.

If we are to include in Wisdom the exquisite little poem, "The Song of Songs," we have another ethical message for modern life. It teaches our wealth-admiring age that marriage-love is the real happiness of life,

If a man would give all the substance of his house for love,
It would utterly be contemned.

V. There remains to consider the ethical value of the Psalms, the lyric prayers and praises of Israel. It is significant that the editors of the Psalter have put an ethical lyric at the head of the collection. The religion of the psalmists is throughout not ceremonial, but ethical. Pss. 15 and 24 describe for all time God's demands of the true worshiper, "clean hands and a pure heart." Every man who thinks that he can separate between religion and life should hear the word of the ancient prayer: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Many psalms are quite in the spirit of the Wisdom literature, and are really didactic poems:

Depart from evil, and do good;
Seek peace, and pursue it.

The sense of sin in the psalmists is not ceremonial, but ethical:

Thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.

The penitential lyrics are surely of ethical value for modern life.

But a marked characteristic of the Psalms which seems to mar their value for today is the recurring reference to "the enemy." It is of course important to recognize that in very few instances are these private enemies. The psalmists pray for victory over enemies of war; they cry to God for deliverance from the foreign conquerors and tyrants, whom they knew so often through their tragic history; they are filled with a righteous anger against oppressors of the poor and weak within the state; or they are indignant with apostate Jews who seek to lead others from the faith. The fundamental idea in these "enemy" psalms is a true one, and its recognition has great moral value. It is the prophet's passion for righteousness and the wise man's belief in retribution, both translated into prayer. But it cannot be denied that the spirit of ancient vengeance often breathes through these ardent poems. The savagery of the warfare of those days is in Ps. 137. The horrible inclusion of wife and children in a man's punishment appears in the awful imprecations of Ps. 109. Jesus has taught us better. He has taught us to hate iniquity and to withstand it, and yet be tender toward the misguided man who is guilty of it. Some of the "enemy" psalms we cannot use. Many of them may well express our horror of the sins and wrongs of the world and our prayer to God that right may conquer.

The Old Testament is not the New Testament. And we have only one Teacher. But the Old Testament has ethical value for us still. It shows to us characters and deeds of moral power; it has commands of abiding validity; it presents ideals of righteousness that the world has not yet learned; it has practical precepts that may teach us wisdom; it has songs and prayers that make us better men.